Transportation History and the Louisiana Comprehensive Plan

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A comprehensive plan is at the very heart of every State Historic Preservation Office. It is the essential mechanism through which office goals and priorities are set. Each unit in the plan describes an important force in the historical development of the state and denotes historic property types associated with that force. An example might be Midwestern dairy barns as a primary property type representing the important development of dairy farming in Michigan. The plan goes on to set forth goals for preserving significant property types. In developing the Louisiana plan, we identified transportation as one of the broad significant forces that shaped the state's history. After all, the transportation systems available during a given era have much to do with the way a state develops. For example, prior to the large-scale construction of railroads in Louisiana which began in the 1870s, much of the state was a wilderness. If an area could not be reached by river or bayou, it generally remained undeveloped. Thus, the history of transportation was included as an important unit within Louisiana's Comprehensive Preservation Plan. In our plan, transportation history is divided into three broad phases: The Steamboat Era, 1812-1900; The Railroad Boom, 1870-1940; and The Early Automobile Age, 1910-1940.

Steamboat Warehouse, built ca 1830, in the New Orleans warehouse district. Photo courtesy John C Ferguson, Division of Historic Preservation, 1990.

The Steamboat Era

Today we think of rivers as barriers to travel, but during the antebellum period they were the very arteries of commerce, serving both the plantation system and the needs of urban travelers. The first steamboat appeared on the Mississippi River in 1812. Named the New Orleans, it operated successfully on the lower Mississippi River, but sank due to a boiler explosion in 1814. Steamboats made tremendous gains in the ensuing decades, displacing more primitive craft such as flatboats and barges which could not travel upstream. Steamboats provided the principal link between crops on Louisiana plantations and world markets in New Orleans. Cotton was picked, ginned, and compressed into bales on the plantation; it was then shipped out via steamboat. Upon reaching New Orleans, cotton was sold through factoring houses, compressed into even smaller bales by huge steam-powered presses, and loaded onto ocean-going vessels. Steamboats also provided vital passenger service. This was particularly important in New Orleans where those who could afford it vacated the city during the summer to escape the perils of the yellow fever season. Indeed, it has been said in this regard that the residents of the Crescent City were divided into two groups, the "go aways" and the "can't get aways."

As with other aspects of the history of transportation in Louisiana, very little remains to represent this all-important river and bayou commerce. Steamboats themselves have all disappeared, the average life of a ship being about 30 years. In addition, docking and loading facilities have long since vanished. About all that remains is a handful of historic steamboat warehouses in the Warehouse District in New Orleans. In addition, one rural steamboat warehouse, located in Washington, is known to survive. Finally, a few steamboat towns with historic districts remain along the Mississippi River.

The Railroad Boom

The coming of railroads to Louisiana was clearly the most significant factor in the decline of steamboat commerce. By the time of the Civil War, trains could average close to 60 miles an hour, over three times as fast as even the fastest steamboats. In-addition, railroads could go anywhere, not just where there happened to be a convenient river or bayou. Although nine short pioneer rail lines were built in Louisiana prior to the Civil War,

Vicksburg, Shreveport & Pacific station in Arcadia, LA, built 1910. Photo courtesy Division of Historic Preservation.

the "Louisiana Railroad Boom" is essentially a post-Civil War phenomenon. Between about 1880 and 1910, some 5,000 miles of mainline trackage were built in the state, opening sparsely populated areas to settlement and creating railroad towns. In those days, railroads were by far the most desirable form of transportation, and every small town Chamber of Commerce eagerly anticipated the "great day" when a rail line would come. Settlements bypassed by the railroads ceased to thrive and became economic backwaters with small populations. Railroads also played a major role in industrializing the rural parts of the state. Most significantly, they made it possible for industrial lumbering companies to harvest the vast pine forests of northern, central, and western Louisiana. Indeed, during the "Golden Years" of the Louisiana Lumber Boom (1904-1927), some 4.3 million acres of pine forests were cut, reducing much of the state to a vast stumpscape of "worthless" cutover timber land.

There is no doubt that railroads had a tremendous effect on the face of Louisiana, yet little remains in the way of historic properties to represent their influence. Most of the large and impressive urban depots, which would have been the pride of any Louisiana community, have been demolished. About 40, mostly rural, depots survive in Louisiana today. The typical historic Louisiana depot is a single-story frame building with racially segregated waiting rooms at one end and a freight room at the other. These are long, low structures with platforms, broad overhanging eaves, and little ornamentation. Other types of historic properties associated with the great age of railroading in Louisiana include: railroad warehouses (about 20 survive), railroad hotels (perhaps 10 survive), and train sheds (one is known to survive). The reason so little survives is that as railroads declined, related facilities tended to be abandoned. The railroad community of Ruston, LA is a case in point. In the early years of this century, this small city possessed a roundhouse, a railroad foundry and shops, two small buildings in which traveling salesmen (known as "drummers") could display their wares, six depots, and several railroad hotels. Today two small depots and a single railroad hotel are all that remain. And at the time of this writing, the hotel is in deteriorated condition.

The Early Automobile Age

When railroading peaked in Louisiana in 1910, with over 5,000 miles of mainline trackage, scarcely anyone would have imagined that railroads would decline almost as quickly as they arose. But as the 20th century progressed, increasing competition from cars and trucks and a publicly-funded highway system took its toll. By 1970 mainline trackage was down to less than 2,000 miles. Thus, the face of Louisiana was changing again, this time due to the coming of the automobile age. It is not known when the first automobile appeared in the state, but in 1909 a world speed record of 60 miles per hour was set in New Orleans which did much to popularize "horseless carriages." Prior to about 1920, few hard surface roads existed outside of Louisiana's major cities. But with the election of progressive Governor John M. Parker in 1919, Louisiana was brought squarely into the automobile age. The Parker administration undertook a major road building program and founded the official

3 V Tourist Courts, built in 1938, St. Francisville, LA. Photo courtesy Division of Historic Preservation.

state highway system. Governor Huey P. Long, Parker's successor, continued this building program, adding features such as major automotive bridges spanning the Mississippi River. And despite the Great Depression, growth in automobile ownership continued to skyrocket, so much so that by 1940 there were nearly 375,000 vehicles registered in the state.

Automobiles changed the look of both urban and rural areas. Rural settlements with general stores ceased to be important because people could drive to town. Cities and towns began to spread along transportation corridors in a manner quite unlike the older and relatively packed railroad towns. During the 1920s and 1930s, Louisianians began to see the now familiar endless transition zone between town and country in which development gradually "peters out."

Historic properties associated with the early automobile age in Louisiana include motor hotels or motels, early gas stations, diners or roadside restaurants, and automobile dealerships. Although no inventory exists, very few of these historic resources are thought to survive. For example, as far as the State Historic Preservation Office is aware, only three historic motel courts remain in Louisiana. The problem is that transportation corridors change so quickly that cultural resources tend to disappear before they are recognized as historic and worthy of preservation. For example, approximately eight years ago, Louisiana's last remaining original 1960s McDonald's restaurant was demolished and replaced after only about 20 years of existence.

As one can see, historic properties with a direct and compelling link with the history of transportation and development are altogether rare. Thus, efforts to preserve them should reflect a coherent and comprehensive statewide strategy. This is why the history of transportation is incorporated as a unit within the Louisiana Comprehensive Historic Preservation Plan. Goals concerning the preservation of related properties include targeting National Register nominations, targeting grant funds for restoration work, and implementing educational and outreach / public awareness programs. Specific objectives for targeted historic resources are drawn up on a yearly basis as part of the Historic Preservation Fund grants cycle. We recommend this overall approach in

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peoples, however, origin and creation stories say that we have been here forever. But before we allow this particular discussion to become a continuing argument on the exact time of arrival, we should pause to remember that the unavoidable fact will always be that the various native peoples of this continent were indeed here long before the Europeans. And in that time before the Europeans, cultures, societies, and languages were born, evolved, and, in some cases, died. For contemporary non-native society to be cognizant of that fact is to validate, for themselves, the rich, non-European cultural diversity of North America. To us Native Americans, our cultures, societies, and languages have always been valid and tangible and Euro-American or Euro-Canadian acceptance is not a requirement to have that sense about ourselves. However, all peoples need to recognize that different peoples—and therefore different cultures—do exist. The recognition of cultural diversity then becomes a basis for dialogue and a way to strengthen the human community. Anything less can be, and has been, the basis for conflict.

Valuing cultural diversity is knowing that being different does not mean being "less than" or "better than." Valuing cultural diversity is to recognize that being different is simply being different. Valuing cultural diversity is to say, in a sense, **that I know your way may be better than my way or it may not be as good as my way, but I do understand that it is your way, and I will not deny it to you.** Valuing cultural diversity is to say further that **if given the opportunity I will sincerely try to learn about your way, not to take it for my own necessarily, but, so that I can learn all I can about you.**

Valuing cultural diversity is to enhance and strengthen the global community through the avenue of awareness. Gaining that awareness does not mean a forced agreement with a differing philosophy. It does mean acceptance of the fact that a differing philosophy has a right to existence. That is how valuing cultural diversity becomes cultural validation.

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grappling with the wide variety of historic resources associated with the development of transportation and transportation corridors. We can attest that in Louisiana it has produced concrete results.

For Further Reading

Note: Much of the information contained in this paper was drawn from the National Register files in the Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation and would not be available to the general public. However, the following sources can be consulted for further reading.

Newton, Milton B. *Louisiana: A Geographical Portrait,* published by Geoforensics, Baton Rouge, LA, 1987 (Press defunct).

Kniffen, Fred B. *Louisiana: Its Land and People,* published by Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, LA, 1968.

Davis, Edwin Adams. *Louisiana: A Narrative History,* published by Claitor's Publishing Division, Baton Rouge, LA, 1961.

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